

# Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

## DEFINITION

*Children witnessing domestic violence* is the percentage of reported domestic violence incidents in which children under age 18 were present in the home. The data are based on police reports of domestic violence in 2001. Domestic violence is the use of physical force, or threat of force, against a current or former partner in an intimate relationship, resulting in fear and emotional and/or physical suffering.

## SIGNIFICANCE

National research indicates that millions of children are exposed to domestic violence each year.<sup>1</sup> In Rhode Island in 2001, police reports indicate that children were present in 35% of domestic violence incidents reported.<sup>2</sup> National surveys of mothers indicate that 80% to 90% of children in homes where there is domestic violence are aware of the abuse.<sup>3</sup>

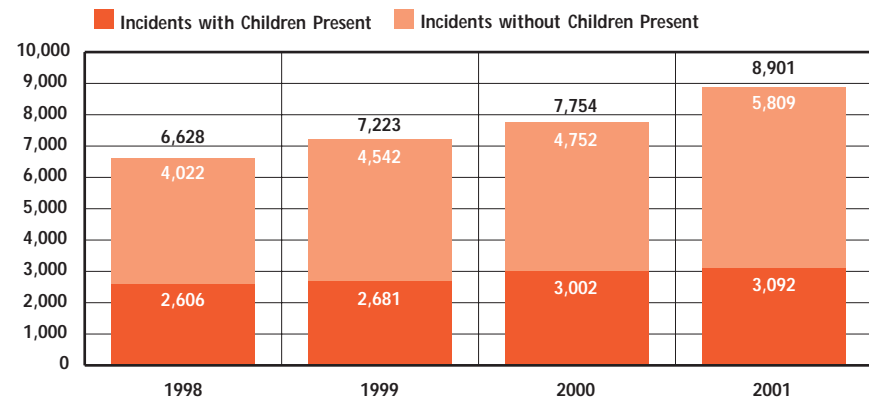
Children are exposed to domestic violence in several ways. They may witness or hear violent events, become directly involved by trying to intervene, or experience the aftermath of violence by seeing their mother's emotional and physical injuries or damage done to their homes.<sup>4</sup> Children who are exposed to domestic violence are much more likely to be victims of child abuse and

neglect.<sup>5</sup> The greater the intensity of the violence against an adult partner, the more likely it is that children are abused as well.<sup>6</sup>

Exposure to violence in the home impairs cognitive, academic and social functioning.<sup>7</sup> Infants may fail to thrive and may not develop attachments to caregivers. Preschool and school-age children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be aggressive and to have behavior problems. They are more prone to depression, anxiety, fear, phobias, sleep disruption, and low self-esteem. Although many children experience these negative effects as a result of exposure to domestic violence, some children emerge from the experience relatively unscathed. A child's age and temperament, the severity and frequency of the violence, and the availability of adults who can emotionally protect or sustain the child greatly affect the child's response.<sup>9</sup>

The effects of exposure to domestic violence can last into adulthood. For males, growing up in a violent home is the strongest predictor of becoming a batterer in the teen and adult years. Both men and women who grow up in violent homes are at increased risk for depression and other trauma-related symptoms.<sup>10</sup>

## Domestic Violence Incidents, Rhode Island 1998-2001



- ◆ The number of domestic violence incidents reported to Rhode Island police increased from 6,628 in 1998 to 8,901 in 2001. The number of reported incidents with children present increased from 2,606 in 1998 to 3,092 in 2001.

Source: Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit, 1998-2001. Includes domestic violence reports from local police and Rhode Island State Police.

## Rhode Island's Response to Domestic Violence

- ◆ Rhode Island's statewide network of six shelters and advocacy programs provides services to victims of domestic violence, including shelter, advocacy, counseling and education. During 2002, 455 women and 359 children spent time in a domestic violence shelter. Rhode Island's domestic violence agencies provided services to 921 children including therapy, individual counseling, expressive arts therapy, and child care. The shelters also provide school-based domestic violence prevention programs.<sup>11</sup>
- ◆ During Rhode Island's 2002 legislative session, a number of bills were passed that strengthen legal protections for victims of domestic violence. These provisions make stalking a felony on the first offense; allow bail and probation violators to be held without bail until the next court session; prohibit discrimination in housing against victims of domestic violence; and strengthen requirements that domestic violence be taken into account in structuring child visitation.<sup>12</sup>

Table 21.

Domestic Violence Incidents with Children Present, Rhode Island, 2001

CITY/TOWN	TOTAL NUMBER OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENT REPORTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF INCIDENTS IN WHICH A CHILD WAS PRESENT	% OF INCIDENTS WITH CHILDREN PRESENT
Barrington	57	19	33%
Bristol	203	58	29%
Burrillville	103	51	50%
Central Falls	159	72	45%
Charlestown	44	16	36%
Coventry	261	95	36%
Cranston	436	147	34%
Cumberland	124	38	31%
East Greenwich	48	15	31%
East Providence	256	103	40%
Exeter	NA	NA	NA
Foster	19	5	26%
Glocester	94	25	27%
Hopkinton	47	22	47%
Jamestown	10	2	20%
Johnston	420	133	32%
Lincoln	81	31	38%
Little Compton	17	5	29%
Middletown	163	59	36%
Narragansett	124	45	36%
Newport	446	152	34%
New Shoreham	8	1	13%
North Kingstown	293	112	38%
North Providence	299	100	33%
North Smithfield	74	25	34%
Pawtucket	845	302	36%
Portsmouth	164	54	33%
Providence	1,733	564	33%
Richmond	17	4	24%
Scituate	35	19	54%
Smithfield	116	38	33%
South Kingstown	138	42	30%
Tiverton	196	72	37%
Warren	259	71	27%
Warwick	430	171	40%
Westerly	170	63	37%
West Greenwich	18	6	33%
West Warwick	244	95	39%
Woonsocket	622	218	35%
<i>Rhode Island State Police</i>	<i>128</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>33%</i>
<i>Core Cities</i>	<i>4,049</i>	<i>1,403</i>	<i>35%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>4,724</i>	<i>1,647</i>	<i>35%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>8,901</i>	<i>3,092</i>	<i>35%</i>

## Children and Domestic Violence in Rhode Island

◆ Rhode Island police officers use special reporting forms to document children's exposure to domestic violence. The attending officer may check any combination of three boxes: Were children present during the incident? Did children witness the incident? Did children hear the incident?<sup>13</sup>

◆ In 2001, police officers reported that in 2,288 incidents the children saw their parent being abused and in 2,553 incidents the children heard (but did not see) their parent being abused.<sup>14</sup>

◆ Table 21 underrepresents the number of incidents of domestic violence in which a child was present because police reports are not fully completed in all cases. Additionally, many cases of domestic violence are never reported to police.

◆ Table 21 underestimates the total number of children who experienced domestic violence in their homes, because more than one child may be present at an incident.

### Source of Data for Table/Methodology

The number of domestic violence incident reports and the number of incidents in which children were present are based on the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms received by the Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2001.

Reports of domestic violence in Exeter are included in the Rhode Island State Police numbers.

Core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket.

### References for Indicator

<sup>1</sup> Domestic Violence and Children: Analysis and Recommendations" in *The Future of Children: Domestic Violence and Children*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1999). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

<sup>2,14</sup> Rhode Island Supreme Court Domestic Violence Training and Monitoring Unit. Based on data from Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault/Child Molestation Reporting Forms received from police departments between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2001.

<sup>3,5,10</sup> *Domestic Violence and Its Impact on Children* (Fact Sheet)(2000). Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

<sup>4,7,8</sup> Fantuzzo, J. and Mohr, W. (1999), "Prevalence and Effects of Child Exposure to Domestic Violence" in *The Future of Children: Domestic Violence and Children*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1999). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> *The Co-occurrence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Mothers and Abuse of Children* (1999). Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>9</sup> McAlister Groves, B. "Mental Health Services for Children Who Witness Domestic Violence" in *The Future of Children: Domestic Violence and Children*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1999). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

<sup>11</sup> The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Data for period from January 1, 2002 to December 31, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> "Top Priority Bills Passed This Year" in *Voices against Violence* (Summer/Fall 2002). Vol. 11, No.2. Providence, RI: Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

<sup>13</sup> Rhode Island Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Reporting Form.